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CAIRO FOR POL - MAXSTADT
STATE PASS TO DEPT OF EDUCATION FOR SECRETARY PAIGE

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: PRESIDENTIAL DELEGATION AT THE
INAUGURATION

11. (U) SUMMARY: Against the backdrop of significant opposition criticism of the April 19 elections and vague threats of mass action against the new Administration, President Obasanjo held a triumphal inaugural on May 29. Security was tight but the events of inauguration week were well organized and peaceful. Because of the bruised feelings of the opposition, this inauguration fell short of the near universal euphoria experienced in 1999. Yet, overall it was celebratory. The official USG delegation led by Secretary of Education Rod Paige was well received by the GON. The delegation attended all key events including the inaugural ceremony and subsequent gala dinner. The delegation also met President Obasanjo the day after his inauguration. END SUMMARY.

RIGHT ON TIME FOR THE MAIN EVENT

12. (SBU) After stormy weather delayed the Presidential delegation's arrival in Abuja by a day, the delegation arrived the morning of May 29, just in time to motorcade from the airport to Eagle Square to witness the actual inauguration ceremony. Basically an asphalt lot with bleachers on three sides, Eagle Square was well decorated and colorful. Over 28 Africa Heads of State (including Cameroonian President Paul Biya, who entered the square to loud applause), the U.K. Deputy Prime Minister, other high-level official delegations, the People's Democratic Party national and state hierarchies, famous personalities and numerous strap-hangers. On the other end of the social spectrum, and on the other side of the Eagle Square fence, were literally thousands of Nigerian onlookers who were curious but uninvited guests. Interspersed among the invited guests were some of Abuja's most accomplished touts and pickpockets, wanting to put their agile hands into the pockets of some of Nigeria's wealthiest as they passed through the main pedestrian entrance.

13. (U) The inaugural ceremony lasted approximately two hours. The Vice President, Atiku Abubakar, was sworn in first. This had a bit of a comic element as Vice President Atiku pointedly corrected the Chief Justice after the latter inverted the Vice President's name when administering the oath.

14. (U) Chief Justice Uwais had no trouble with President Obasanjo's name. After being sworn in, Obasanjo delivered his inaugural address. Due to a poor sound system, the address was inaudible to most of the attendees. The event took place with no demonstrations or violence of any kind. After the swearing-in, Secretary Paige and his delegation lunched with the Archbishop of Abuja, Dr. John Onaiyekan, who led a discussion of the HIV/AIDS problem in Nigeria. Joining the Archbishop, representatives of Catholic Relief Services briefed the delegation about their HIV/AIDS program and USAID-sponsored operations.

15. (U) The evening featured the Inaugural Gala and Banquet, with cultural dances, music, a sampling of Nigerian cuisine, and lots of comic relief. During and after the meal, numerous prominent Nigerians (including former Head of State Shagari) and several Heads of State gave toasts in honor of President Obasanjo. Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and Joachim Chissano of Mozambique paid tribute to Obasanjo and emphasized the importance of Nigeria to Africa's political future and economic development.

MEETING WITH OBASANJO

16. (U) Obasanjo's schedule was hectic throughout the

inaugural week. Not only did it include inaugural events and planning, Obasanjo also hosted a NEPAD Summit and bilateral meetings with many visiting Heads of State. Nevertheless, he made it a point to carve out time in his schedule to meet Secretary Paige and the delegation. That meeting came on

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Friday, the morning after the inauguration. Originally, Secretary Paige was to meet President Obasanjo after the

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President's daily 6 a.m. prayer session. Because this was the first morning prayer after the inauguration, it lasted longer than expected. In the end, the delegation was asked to join the President and his inner circle in prayer, where requests for divine guidance and blessings for the two countries and their people featured prominently. After the meeting, the delegation exchanged courtesies and gifts with the President, then departed for the airport and the long flight home.

COMMENT

17. (SBU) Despite the criticism of the elections and the threats to disrupt the inauguration, inaugural week passed without incident. Security was heavy and there were no protests or violence. Also Obasanjo made an astute political move. Holding the NEPAD Summit ensured the attendance of over a score of African Heads of State. This not only added legitimacy to the inauguration, it also may have lessened the inclination to protest, given the overwhelming security presence to shelter the visiting Heads of State.

18. (U) The American official delegation and the unofficial Congressional Black Caucus delegation were well received. The warm reception denoted the continued goodwill in Nigeria for America and the determination of the new Obasanjo Administration to strengthen the bilateral relationship.
JETER